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# He wrote not of war, but of people caught up in it

If you are a cancer victim, you might not want to read "A Private Battle."

Then again, you might. If you are a Cornelius Ryan fan, like me, "Battle" is a must.

Ryan authored three fabulous World War II volumes, each taking some six to eight years to research and write.

"The Longest Day" deals with June 6, 1944 when the Allied armada invaded Normandy. The book was later made into a magnificent film, with the screen play by Ryan.

His "The Last Battle" recounts the final weeks in Berlin and Hitler's demise.

"A Bridge Too Far" is a classic study of a major offensive, dubbed Market-Garden. A total disaster, it was to be a thrust through Holland into Germany, a master plan of British Field Marshall Montgomery.

Ryan has said he didn't write about wars, but rather the people who were caught up in them.

NOW COMES "A Private Battle," an unusual and absorbing work. It is co-authored by Ryan and his wife Kathryn, who, it turns out, was his constant associate in the production of the other books.

This one deals with the cancer which caused Ryan's death. The disease hit him as he turned 50, at the peak of his career. The Ryans had completed some four years of research for "Bridge." Its writing was about to begin.

But the project was delayed nearly a year as Ryan researched cancer, much as he had material for his books.

He interviewed experts in Europe and the United States, always hoping to stumble across a treatment which could arrest and cure the disease.

Kathryn was sympathetic to his quest. What she didn't realize was that her husband had begun to keep secret notes and tapes on all facets of this deadly experience.

AS THE CANCEROUS CELLS gradually took over his body, Ryan led the frantic effort to pull together the thousands of pieces of research and get "Bridge" done.

Ryan suffered greatly. Apparently his sheer de-

termination to complete "Bridge," plus the unending devotion and help from Kathryn are what kept him alive.

Only a few months after the job was finished, in November of 1975, Ryan died.

Some weeks later, as Kathryn and Ryan's secretary Anne Bardenhagen were sorting through Ryan's personal belongings, they came across the tapes.

Thus was born the idea for "A Private Battle." Ryan's secret tapes and notes prove absorbing from two standpoints.

They tell what a cancer victim feels while he battles for his life. There are the indignities — and kindnesses — of the medical profession. And the tapes relate many behind-the-scenes happenings as "Bridge" was being fashioned.

THE METHOD OF PRESENTING "Battle" is interesting. Under "Cornelius" comes excerpts of his tapes. This is followed with "Kathryn" as she recounts her memories of that period.

Here is a sample:  
CORNELIUS

"This is Saturday, February 24, 1973.

"For nearly 10 months I have been on estrogen therapy. I have suspected for almost a month now that the estrogen was no longer working. Three days ago Dr. Willet Whitmore confirmed my fears: Cancer has overridden the treatment once again.

"My legs, where the pain is mostly concentrated, feel as if they are made of rubber. At times I am almost afraid to stand in case they cannot support me.

"I am afraid to take pain-killers during the day. I need an absolutely clear mind in order to work on the book. I am finding that the more intensely I concentrate on Market-Garden, the less pain I feel."

KATHRYN:

"He stubbornly refused to take Percodan for relief. Daily the pain continued. It no longer racked him from late afternoon and through the night. By then it was a constant presence he fought doggedly against, even as he turned out more handwritten pages daily than he had ever done before."

THROUGH ALL THIS, and a number of hospital stays, the Ryans refused to let down in the project of wrapping up "Bridge."

Ryan's hallmark was his research. He and his wife conducted hundreds of interviews with people involved in the battles about which they wrote. They talked to soldiers, generals and civilians. In this way they amassed thousands of first-hand experiences, complete with remembered comments spoken at the time of the action.

Ryan books are laced with quotes of people who were there. It's a technique that makes history come alive. Cornelius Ryan was a master of it.

Sheer heroics of people almost certain to die were often topped with humor. When death looked a soldier straight in the eye, he might toss off a line befitting a Bob Hope.

In a glider drop during Market-Garden, German anti-aircraft fire turned the sky black. One fragile ship continued to head steadily for its appointed landing zone as others around it were being destroyed in flames.

Dutch civilians in the fields were so joyed at seeing that lone Allied glider keep coming, they ignored the German fire and stood waving at the aircraft. With their fingers they signaled "V for Victory."

One glider-borne soldier yelled to his buddies, "Hey, look, they're giving two-to-one odds we won't make it."

Such antics appeared to have helped Ryan through the ordeal of completing "Bridge." And thank goodness for that.

NOT LONG AFTER "Bridge" had been published, I was in Europe ready to head home. I long had anticipated Ryan's latest book and was anxious to devour it, much as I had his two previous war volumes.

As you might recall, the bridge that couldn't be captured from the Germans was in the city of Arnhem.

Fate had me flying from Amsterdam on a Dutch Airlines plane. As I scurried toward the loading gate, I spied a rack of books. "A Bridge Too Far." I quickly purchased a copy.



The team, Cornelius and Kathryn, by their Connecticut home.

This would be my reading during the seven-hour flight home.

While boarding the plane, I notice on the ship's fuselage its name, *The City of Arnhem*. I blinked and felt a little chill.

In minutes we were in the air, gently circling into the flight pattern. I sat quietly in my seat, the copy of *Bridge* in my lap, looking at the Dutch countryside.

Speaking to myself, I said, "Down there, not many miles away, is where it all happened."

Reading "Bridge" that day was one of my life's most memorable experiences.

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